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Wastewater Permit Means Big Savings For City

Primary Treatment At Point Loma Wastewater Treatment Plant Saves City \$1.5 Billion

SAN DIEGO -- Mayor Jerry Sanders is calling billions of gallons of sewage flowing into the Pacific Ocean a victory for all San Diegans.

The sewage, which has already undergone primary treatment, is dumped 4.5 miles offshore where it drops off a shelf beneath the sea, creating an almost ideal situation.

A federal permit makes it possible to continue the current standards for wastewater treatment without having to spend \$1.5 billion to build a secondary treatment facility.

"We're removing 89 percent of total suspended solids," said San Diego Assistant Public Utilities Director Ann Sasaki. "That means we're putting out 32 parts per million solids to the ocean, where the secondary standard is 30 parts per million."

Officials say the Point Loma Wastewater Treatment Plant, where primary treatment happens, is very close to the ultimate goal with some help from the topography.

"The way that the tides work and the currents work, it draws solids and water down into a canyon and keeps it from coming back on shore," said Senior Wastewater Operations Supervisor David Huntamer.

Mayor Jerry Sanders said the wastewater has virtually no impact on the ocean at all, based on studies conducted by scientists at UC San Diego and San Diego State University.

"There is no impact beyond 30 feet from our outfall," said Sanders. "They have verified over and over that because of how close we come to secondary standards in treating water and because of the conditions 4.5 miles out, we literally have no impact on the ocean at all."

Local environmental groups supported the city in its application to federal regulators.

"This is absolutely the best thing for the city," said Belinda Smith of the Surfrider Foundation.

"We have a water crisis in San Diego," said San Diego Coast Keepers Executive Director Bruce Reznik. "We should not at this point in time be arguing about advanced primary or secondary sewage treatment, we should be figuring out a way to decrease or even eliminate sewage discharged into the ocean altogether."

The compromise also included a study, which is already underway.

"We would conduct a study to see if toilet to tap, reclaimed water, is good for San Diego," said Smith. "We believe it is good because we'd be shipping less water out of Point Loma."

City hall and environmentalists are calling this a win-win situation as they work together toward a solution rather than fight it out in court.

The permit went into effect on Sunday and is in place for five years.